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October 24, 2000

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Report Documentation Page			<i>Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188</i>	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE 24 OCT 2000	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 24-10-2000 to 24-10-2000		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Sadat's Fall 1973 War: Averting Arab Winter		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College,300 5th Avenue,Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319-6000		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT see report				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 17
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified		19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

Sadat's Fall 1973 War: Averting Arab Winter

Thesis

This strategic analysis reveals a coherent national strategy of a limited war integrated with non-violent instruments of statecraft that ultimately earned Egypt full partnership in the Middle East peace process. The October 1973 Yom Kippur War was a measurably successful effort based on a strategic calculus widely attributed to Anwar Sadat, Egypt's political leader and military Commander-in-Chief. The War's end started a chain of events that made possible the formulation of boundaries that Israel still shares with its Arab neighbors, 27 years to the day cease-fire was observed in the Middle East.

Egypt's Self-Perception

Not only were the Israelis victorious over Arab military forces in the 1967 Six-Day War, but they also dealt a severe psychological blow to the self-esteem of the Arab people. The Arabs suffered high numbers of casualties and were forced to cede valuable land, but more importantly, their decisive loss challenged their collective sense of honor and dignity, attributes that are held in high regard in Islamic culture.

By the early 1970's, the Egyptian people were showing signs of both restlessness and declining faith in their leadership. In response, Sadat pledged that a "battle of destiny"¹ would be waged against Israel to establish an acceptable environment from which it would be possible for Egypt to engage in negotiations with Israel to regain both the occupied territories and national honor. Several years had passed since Egypt

¹ Bard E. O'Neill, "The October War: A Political-Military Assessment," *Air University Review* 25 (July-August 1974), 27.

experienced a humiliating defeat by the Israeli military, yet no apparent progress had been made in achieving the objectives that Sadat promised. This lapse of time, combined with the absence of retaliatory actions against Israel, served to erode confidence in Sadat's leadership and to increase the Arab people's sense of urgency for retribution. Furthermore, the Egyptian economy was in extreme duress. Some partial relief was provided by Arab allies to recoup lost Suez Canal revenues. Sadat succinctly assessed the situation in September 1973 when he stated, "our economy has fallen below zero."²

Meanwhile, Israel was using this temporal dimension of the geopolitical situation to its advantage. The longer the Israelis held Egyptian territories, the higher the probability that the Palestinians would become accustomed to life under Israeli rule and begin to accept the status quo in the occupied territories. International public opinion was also beginning to accept the *fait accompli* of Israeli occupation of historically Arab land. Time was working against Egypt's national interest of regaining its territorial sovereignty.

Sadat was fully cognizant of the ramifications associated with the passage of time and realized that a continuation of the diplomatic stalemate was weakening his people's resolve, confidence, and initiative to effect favorable terms of peace. He also realized that the existing détente between the Soviet Union and the United States created an international environment in which Egypt's interests were a distant secondary consideration. Nonetheless, Sadat demonstrated an eagerness to give diplomacy a chance and show good faith effort to resolve Egypt's compromised interests in a non-violent way.

² Anwar Sadat, *In Search of Identity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), 245.

Many of his countrymen viewed Sadat's lack of military force against Israel as a lack of courage. Those outside the Arab nations tended to view Sadat's preference for using the negotiating table rather than the military arena as the desperate actions of a weak leader who had few other options available to him. This "lack of face" was difficult for Sadat, but he sought the greater good for his nation as the ultimate goal for his actions. Appropriately, his personal feelings and reputation had to be subordinate concerns.

International Views of Egypt

Within the Soviet Union's Sphere of Influence. By 1973, the USSR had provided Egypt with some 4,000 to 5,000 military advisors; 10,000 to 15,000 support personnel, some of whom manned Surface to Air Missile (SAM) sites; 200 pilots with ground crews for MiG and Sukhoi fighters; and garrison forces controlling four Egyptian ports and seven airfields.³ Nonetheless, Egypt found the Soviets to be untrustworthy and reluctant allies. Moscow was unwilling to support Egypt's efforts to regain territory from Israel because it did not want to jeopardize its own relationship with the United States. Time and again the Soviets failed to honor promises to supply state-of-the-art weapons to Egypt. They were cognizant of the support that the United States was providing Israel and knew that any backing they provided to Egypt for a hostile confrontation with Israel would be seen as an indirect challenge to the United States. The Soviet Union did not

³ The Insight Team of the London Sunday Times, "Sadat Decides on War," Chapter 3 in *The Yom Kippur War* (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1974), 56.

want to get involved in this type of confrontation with America, especially on behalf of an allied nation that it viewed as a far inferior military power.

Irrespective of the fact that the Soviet Union had supported an attempted *coup d'etat* of Sadat's administration, and had publicly acknowledged that Sadat was not its preferred choice as the leader of the Egyptian people, the USSR was courted by Sadat, primarily for its ability to provide critical resources and military technology to Egypt. Sadat considered a benevolent superpower invaluable in the role of providing the means for achieving the desired results. With the Soviet alliance intact, the United States would be less likely to interfere with the non-hostile national interests of Egypt common to those of the Soviet Union. In the main, the Soviets provided to their allies a protective defensive shield in the Middle East region that increased the perception of Egypt's potential power.

Western Perceptions of Egypt. It was obvious to Sadat that his country was viewed by the United States as yesterday's problem and of no immediate discrete threat in tomorrow's international landscape. Israel had won the war in 1967, and the political-military power was, according to the Americans, in favor of the Israelis. The United States was willing to arbitrate diplomatic discussions between Egypt and Israel, but did not support withdrawal of Israeli occupation forces to the pre-1967 borders that had been established by UN Resolution 242 as a necessary prerequisite to negotiations. With diplomacy deadlocked, the dissension among the Egyptian people growing, and the economy showing signs of distress, the situation in Egypt was approaching crisis proportions.

Sadat recognized that the oil controlled by Egypt and its Arab neighbors gave the Arab nations an enormous economic advantage in building other, non-Arab, alliances.

Restricting exports of OPEC oil had an important and influential impact on a number of nations that otherwise would not have been concerned with Egypt's national interests.

By engaging in carefully orchestrated diplomacy and using the "oil weapon,"⁴ Sadat was able to convince, or at least assure non-interference by, almost every state in Black Africa, the majority of the Third World nations, Japan, and most of European Economic Community of the merits of Egypt's cause.

Support of the Islamic Community. Sadat applied his extensive diplomatic talents and enjoyed strong relations with leaders of oil-rich neighboring Arab countries. By September 1973, he achieved total Arab unity among neutral states. He appealed to the national insecurities of the countries represented at the Non-Aligned Summit Conference in Algiers by claiming, "nothing short of a complete Arab surrender would satisfy Israel,"⁵ and won their support and cooperation. Sadat gained a broad acceptance within the Islamic community for his three fundamental assumptions:

- ◆ Justice of the Arab cause;
- ◆ Faith in the Arab warrior; and
- ◆ Trust in the solidarity of the Arab front against Israel.⁶

⁴ O'Neill, 31.

⁵ Sadat, 240.

⁶ Hassan El Badri, Taha El Magdoub, and Mohammed Dia El Din Zohdy, "Decision and Concept," in *The Ramadan War, 1973* (Dunn Loring, VA: T.N. Dupuy Associates, Inc., 1978), 21.

National Strategy includes Hostile Engagement

The national interests of Egypt were focused on regaining the land that was taken in 1967 by the Israelis and reinstating the honor and dignity of the Arab people. It was these interests that drove Sadat's political objective to break the diplomatic stalemate that existed between Egypt and Israel. Sadat sought to transform the psychological basis for intransigence at the negotiating table by shaking belief in Israeli invincibility and Arab impotence. He envisioned his mission as restoring Egypt's self-respect and increasing political flexibility through all tools of statecraft, specifically psychological, diplomatic, and military instruments.⁷

Sadat narrowed the field of rational pursuit of the political objective with two basic premises: 1) the Arab goal of total Israeli withdrawal was unattainable through diplomacy alone, and 2) the immediate aims of diplomacy were unsupportable for Egypt as long as the perception of Egypt's weaknesses prevailed.⁸ Hence, the decision for military action rationally followed as a virtual necessity. Sadat considered a limited, offensive strike against Israel to be a complementary application of the military tool of statecraft. The strike, if executed successfully, would be fast, hard, and lethal, resulting in high human casualties and material losses for Israel. He rationalized that this geopolitical shock would heighten concern and awareness throughout the world regarding the injustice of the Egypt/Israel deadlock.⁹ With a successful military effort, Sadat

⁷ Henry Kissinger, "Why We Were Surprised," *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 460.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ O'Neill, 32.

reasoned that the stage would be set for the beginning of diplomatic negotiations that would culminate with Israel's withdrawal from the occupied Arab land and with the restoration of honor to the Egyptian people.

Once war started, the risk of escalation was counterbalanced by the certainty of superpower predisposition. Based on concern brought about by the withholding of valuable oil supplies by Arab countries and the resulting impact on the global economy, the United States and the Soviet Union wanted to avoid an armed confrontation over the Egypt/Israel stalemate. Thus, Sadat concluded that it would be in the best interests of both the United States and the Soviet Union to favor non-violent methods for reaching settlement that was satisfactory to the Arabs over furthering the short duration, limited war he contemplated.

Capabilities and Vulnerabilities

Egypt's Strengths and Weaknesses. Sadat recognized that his country was viewed as a defeated nation and knew that he had to reverse this image, both internally and in the international context. To be successful, the Arab people would have to overcome their own sense of inferiority and improve their military capabilities.

Egypt's greatest strength was a just and legal cause for fighting, stemming from an overwhelming resolve that the Arab people were entitled, and morally obligated, to recapture territory and to regain their honor and dignity. Egypt also had the strength of Arab unity, vastly numerically superior population, and the sympathetic support of the

international community. Furthermore, Egypt had a comprehensive air defensive cover over the Canal Zone provided by a Soviet supplied surface-to-air missile system.¹⁰

Israel's Centers of Gravity. Israel enjoyed a reputation as a superior military nation since its victory over the Egyptian military in the Six-Day War. It had a rapid and efficient mobilization system, a well-trained reserve force, and a strong spirit for survival.¹¹ The Israelis also possessed superior air power and state-of-the-art weapons, many of which were supplied by their ally, the United States. In addition, they were assured that additional weapons and military support would be readily provided by the United States, if a situation should arise that required such assistance.¹²

Israel's vulnerabilities included an extended frontier and lines of communications that had to be maintained and protected. Its economy was weakened by defense commitments that exceeded allocated resources. Israel could ill afford to engage in a prolonged war, both because of popular intolerance to mounting casualties and constrained financial resources. But the most damaging weakness of Israel was the arrogance of national character, which led its military and political leaders to believe that the June 1967 conflict was the “war to end all wars.”¹³ Israel’s over-estimation of its superiority led the Israelis to discount the will of the Arab people, and underestimate the opponent’s military power.

¹⁰ El Badri, et al., 19.

¹¹ Ibid., 19, 23.

¹² Major-General A.H. Farrar-Hockley, “The October War,” Chapter II in *The Arab-Israeli War, October 1973: Background and Events*, Adelphi Paper 111 (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, Winter 1974-75), 15.

¹³ Mohammed Abdel Ghani El-Gamasy, *The October War* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1993), 184.

Sadat Weighs his Options

Having arrived at the decision for war as a way of achieving the political objectives, Sadat assumed the antithesis to bring rigor to his strategic thinking. He reasoned that without waging war and pressing on with diplomatic efforts, negotiations would lead to an untenable dilemma. He could ill afford to let the US negotiations succeed, at the cost of mortgaging his domestic position. Conversely, he could not afford to allow US negotiations to fail, undermining US interest in mediation; thereby, dooming his country to economic and political collapse.¹⁴ Therefore, his options for military actions were reduced to either a war of attrition or a limited war. Sadat analyzed the means available, weighed the capabilities and vulnerabilities of both options, and concluded that the military objective with the best chance of success was limited war. This was the path of less cost and higher risk. Convinced of this course of action, Sadat tasked his military planners to devise an offensive military concept that mitigated this inherent risk.¹⁵

The limited war plan that emerged was a classic strategic and tactical offensive surprise attack on two fronts. The military objective was the defeat of the Israeli armed forces deployed in Sinai Peninsula and Syrian Plateau and seizure of strategic land areas. Successful execution was required in order to pave the way for complete liberation of occupied territories necessary for a just and peaceful solution.¹⁶ In short, the concept was a combination of river assault crossing and wide-front landing operation on a defended hostile shore.¹⁷

¹⁴ Kissinger, 461.

¹⁵ El Badri, et al., 15.

¹⁶ Ibid., 16, 17.

¹⁷ Ibid., 21.

The overall military strategy required not only the whole of the Egyptian army, but also the participation of the entire country. Sadat spent 127 million Egyptian pounds to prepare his nation for war. The major portion of the Nile Basin, from Alexandria to Aswan, was prepared to be a battlefield. Should the war flow counter to the plan, “each factory and power station had alternative plans for operation” and contingency protocols to continue service should facilities sustain damage.¹⁸

Military Readiness meshes with Chosen Political Course

Diversion Strategy for War. The Chinese strategist, Sun Tzu, believed that all warfare is based on deception.¹⁹ Sadat obviously subscribed to this doctrine. He brilliantly masterminded striking the enemy when least anticipated, by using a number of diversion tactics. Sadat paralyzed his opponents with their own preconceptions and co-opted many foreign government elites, albeit unwittingly, to his cause.

For example, Sadat purposely provided clear indications that an attack on Israel was imminent in May and August 1973. Both cases resulted in Israel expending over 10 million dollars to mobilize troops to prepare for the anticipated attacks. This tactic of “calling wolf” had the intended outcome. Israel, its economy already pressured, could not afford to take the zero risk approach to every threat from Egypt; thus, on the days leading to the planned attack, the indicators were ignored.

Israel assumed no attack would be attempted as long as Egypt lacked air superiority. Furthermore, Israel’s defense establishment assumed that a 24 to 48 hour warning would be provided intentionally to give the US time to intervene. It was also

¹⁸ Sadat, 241.

¹⁹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (Oxford University Press, 1971), 66.

assumed that the Arabs were awaiting the results of the October elections in Israel in order to reassess any changes in political posturing.²⁰

To further confuse Israel, Sadat used strategic deception in combination with his knowledge that many European countries were in collusion with Israel. He purposely divulged to a mistrusted foreign minister that he was going to the United Nations Headquarters in October 1973, the month for which he planned to wage his assault on Israel.²¹ This diversion tactic was intended to give his enemy the message that hostile actions were not likely because he would be out of the country. Indeed, the ploy worked and the Israelis surmised that any military operation on the Egyptian borders at this time would be just another exercise and not pose a real threat to Israel.

In addition, Sadat pardoned a number of journalists and students who had taken part in a past campaign designed to discredit him and promote instability in Egypt. His leniency sent a message that Sadat wanted domestic reconciliation and was probably leaning toward a peaceful means to deal with the anger and hostility present in the wake of the 1967 War. This conclusion was believable given the world's view of Egypt as a defeated nation. This diversion tactic was easy to read as a sign of a nation that knew its place and its inability to challenge its status quo. Thus, Sadat's intention to galvanize the will of his people, including political foes, against Israel, the common enemy, was cleverly concealed.

Simultaneous with Sadat's military preparation, he chose to give the world yet another set of misuses as to Egypt's intended course of action. When Sadat expelled Soviet military experts in July 1972, he sent an intentionally false message that "Sadat

²⁰ Kissinger, 460. El Badri, et al., 22.

²¹ Sadat, 244.

had given up” on his attempt to woo the Soviet Union into supporting his plans for war. Obviously, if Egypt was serious about attacking Israel, it would be seeking an advantage of Soviet means and not closing the door to them. This was precisely the message that Sadat hoped to send with the expulsion of Soviet personnel. This bold step was intended to remove the impediment posed by Soviet advisors who were adverse to a pre-emptive Egyptian offensive, demonstrate openness to US diplomatic efforts, and displace the USSR from its assumed role as colonial overlord to a more proper ally relationship.²²

Sadat’s Diplomacy Camouflages his Military Genius at Work. While Sadat was working his diplomatic initiatives -- including persuading support from Arab nations; using the “oil weapon” to coerce non-interference from other nations; and negotiating with the Soviets for weapons -- his country was slowly, methodically, and deterministically planning for war, in coordination with Syria, against Israel.

With Egypt’s military goals and defensive contingency plan established, Sadat made public his desired end state. During a session of the UN Security Council, he articulated his proposal for a viable political settlement. In so doing, Sadat provided grounds for an exit from a prolonged and counterproductive war, not only for his nation, but also for Israel. This also gave the international community a benchmark as to what Sadat’s overall objectives were prior to his nation entering war.

The Arabs left little to chance. They were thorough in their preparation for war by rehearsing and re-rehearsing every detail of the war plan, code-named ‘BADR.’ Sadat was aware of the need to strike with overwhelming force and to catch the enemy off

²² The Insight Team of the London Sunday Times, 58.

guard. To accomplish this, he needed to maximize every advantage that was available to the Arab military forces.

Scientific precision and thorough research were the keys to the detailed plan. A junior engineer officer devised the technique for cutting passes in the substantial Israeli earthworks on the canal's East bank, using German high-pressure fire pumps. Using the pumps in combination with Soviet WWII-era bridge sections, the Egyptian Army honed the tactic of breaching Israeli defenses that was crucial to prompt armor advance.²³ The technical characteristics of the Suez Canal and other readiness factors were studied to determine the best time for crossing the waterway, considering tide conditions, speed and direction of currents, best seasonal conditions, longest period of nightfall, time when the communications networks in Israel would be non-operative, as well as the Jewish liturgical calendar. October 6, 1973 was chosen as the optimum date for the offensive when Israel would be least ready.²⁴

Pride and Ownership in Offensive Planning. War is dominated by the characteristics of the people who fight it. Motivated and inspired men and women use their minds, their instincts, and their physical capabilities to overcome extraordinary difficulties in securing desired outcomes. With this understanding of the nature of man, Sadat was convinced that Egypt's strength rested with its military personnel and their desire to redeem their honor. The will of the people was the most powerful military tool Egypt possessed and a center of gravity to be leveraged by leadership.

²³ Sadat, 251.

²⁴ El-Gamasy, 180.

Sadat was determined to actively involve every officer in his military force in the offensive military planning. He wanted his troops to be stakeholders in the process and committed to the cause. This was based on his belief that men with confidence could overcome weaknesses in other areas. For example, every infantry officer was asked to climb atop the 60-foot defense works on the West bank of the canal, look East, and define a battle plan for implementation following successful crossing of the canal along the 500 mile front. This exercise instilled a powerful vision in the minds of the men who would do the fighting.²⁵

Involving the whole of Egyptian armed forces not only increased their self-confidence, but gave the rank and file a personal investment in assuring the success of the war operation. This approach has proven to be an effective management tool for bringing people in industry through change, but it is a seldom-utilized leadership technique in the military environment. Rather, direction for most military operations is top-down, where officers are given orders without the complete knowledge of the why, where, and how of the planning function. Sadat did not want this approach in his military. He desired that every officer understand all aspects of the battle plan so that a breakdown in communications would not overly hinder implementation of the plan.

Implementation of the War Plan

The military objective was clear. The Egyptian army was to cross the Suez Canal and stop in the Sinai Desert before reaching the Sinai passes 20 to 30 miles east of the canal, the extent of SAM cover over the East bank. Then they were to hang on.

²⁵ Ibid., 237.

The war was executed per plan, and by the third day of fighting, Egypt was well on its way to securing its objective. The pre-emptive offensive succeeded in breaking Israeli lines of communication through the combined coordinated effort of air strikes (222 aircraft), artillery barrage (3,000 pieces), infantry assault (300,000 men) and tank offensive (five armor divisions). The surprise element of the strategy succeeded with devastating effect on the Israeli defenders. President Nixon claimed that because the CIA and Israeli Intelligence were caught off-guard, the US experienced a “complete surprise.”²⁶ Secretary of State Henry Kissinger explained, “Sadat overwhelmed the US with information and let us draw the wrong conclusion, so...6 October was the culmination of a failure of political analysis on the part of its victims.”²⁷

By 24 October 1973, a lasting cease-fire was observed, ending the violent conflict. Because at different times the seesaw battle had each side precariously close to defeat, and both superpowers threatening escalation, precise identification of the victor was a function of space and time, and remains debatable. However, Egypt’s military objectives, as specified by Sadat prior to the conflict, were clearly achieved. Sadat had led his country to accomplish the desired ends through means well matched, and via ways that were realistically unavoidable.

Conclusions

By following a coherent national strategy, Sadat achieved his objective of discounting the world’s perception of Israel as being invincible and of Egypt as being

²⁶ Richard M. Nixon, *The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1978), 920.

²⁷ Kissinger, 459.

weak. In so doing, the Arab people were of the right psychological mindset to begin the heretofore-impossible task of negotiations with the Israelis. Sadat succeeded in a war to restore Egypt's self-respect and increase diplomatic flexibility. He achieved these objectives for ends that were more psychological and diplomatic than military.

“The journey to peace in the Middle East began with Anwar Sadat, and could not have progressed without him.”²⁸ Within months of the termination of armed conflict, boundaries were negotiated that returned occupied land to Egypt. Soon after, some progress in other aspects of the Arab-Israeli problem was achieved as well. However, the anger and hostility that the Arabs and Israelis harbor toward one another was never adequately resolved. In this war, as “in [any] war, the result is never final”²⁹ without a change in attitude. To this day, lasting peaceful stability continues to elude the Middle East region, and seemingly remains as the mythic pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

²⁸ Kissinger, 651.

²⁹ Michael Howard and Peter Paret, *Carl Von Clausewitz on War* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), 80.